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ABSTRACT

Arthurdale, in northern West Virginia, was the first New Deal subsistence homestead project. Begun in 1933, the Arthurdale settlement was created to house displaced and jobless coal mining families. Eleanor Roosevelt was very active in the Arthurdale project. At the time of the project's founding, it was attacked by some for its costliness and the extent of the federal government's involvement. However, the settlement also has been praised as a noble New Deal experiment to uplift dispossessed West Virginia coal miners, among the most wretched in the Depression-era United States. This account of the Arthurdale settlement also focuses in its community school, which was envisioned by Mrs. Roosevelt to be the center of the community's activities. The school was praised as a progressive community school that fostered a spirit of community cooperation. An annotated list of references is included. (DB)

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Arthurdale (WV), Its Community School, and Director

Elsie Ripley Clapp (1879-1965): First New Deal Subsistence Homestead Program (1933-48)

By Franklin Parker

Some 60 years ago, Arthurdale, in northern West Virginia, was a storm center of New Deal controversy. The first, highly controversial New Deal subsistence homestead project was sited there in 1933. Arthurdale housed displaced and jobless coal mining families. What began as a grand scheme to ease Great Depression suffering by providing homes, gardens, a community school, and jobs for those in want, became a much criticized, costly project for the time, which the federal government was forced to sell. Yet Arthurdale has also been praised as a noble New Deal experiment to uplift dispossessed West Virginia coal miners, among the most wretched of Depression-era Americans.

Lorena A. Hickok "Discovers" Scott's Run, WV

The Arthurdale story began with Associated Press reporter Lorena A. Hickok (1893-1968), who covered Eleanor Roosevelt during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) first run for the presidency. They became friends and confidantes. Mrs. Roosevelt urged Hickok to take a job as investigator of relief needs for Harry L. Hopkins (1890-1946), Federal Emergency Relief Administration head and later Works Progress Administration head. Hickok reported to him on economic conditions and relief needs in 32 states during 1933-36. She sent the same information in letters to Mrs. Roosevelt. FDR saw both her reports to Hopkins and letters to Mrs. Roosevelt.

Hickok first sought advice from the Philadelphia-based Quaker relief agency, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Executive Secretary Clarence E. Pickett (1884-1964) told her, "If you want to see just how bad things are, go down to the southwestern part of the state and

into West Virginia." Of conditions among jobless mining families in northern West Virginia, she wrote:

> Scott's Run, a coal-mining community, not far from Morgantown, was the worst place I'd ever seen. In a gutter, along the main street through the town, there was stagnant, filthy water, which the inhabitants used for drinking, cooking, washing, and everything else imaginable. On either side of the street were ramshackled houses, black with coal dust, which most Americans would not have considered fit for pigs. And in those houses every night children went to sleep hungry, on piles of bug-infested rags, spread out on the floor. There were rats in those houses.[1]

Appalachian Coal Miners and the Great Depression

Scott's Run, a creek that empties into the Monongahela River, is also the name of coal mining communities along its banks. It had been an active mining area near Morgantown, WV, site of West Virginia University (WVU). The late nineteenth century coal boom, heightened by World War I energy needs, lured marginal small farmers to work for wages in Appalachian coal mines. Large and many smaller mines flourished in boom times, owned mainly by profit-hungry companies based outside the coal mining areas. Before unions gained ground, miners were housed in low-cost company-owned shacks, paid in scrip redeemable only in a company store, and were controlled and constrained in company-owned and policed towns. The 1920s saw coal mine overexpansion, competition, strikes, and labor-union conflicts (Scott's Run was sometimes called Bloody Run because of its labor union violence). West Virginia coal mining cutbacks and closings became acute by 1928. Then came the 1929 Wall Street crash, the Great Depression, and even harder times for miners. Mines closed, lights were turned off, and water pumps shut down. Some families were permitted to live in shacks lest empty ones be torn down for firewood.

By 1930, with little mining and much hunger at Scott's Run, a White House Conference on Child Welfare publicized the plight of undernourished Appalachian miners' children. Federal money left from post-World War I aid to Belgian and French children was given to the AFSC in 1931 to help feed needy miners' children in the West Virginia-Pennsylvania Monongahela River

Valley. AFSC relief work in the area was centered at Scott's Run because of its poverty and because of earlier relief efforts of Morgantown social agencies and of the WVU Extension Service.

Mrs. Roosevelt knew of Scott's Run, having bought some furniture made there as part of the relief effort. (She was subsidizing a furniture-making cottage industry for poorer people at Val-kill near Hyde Park). She also knew of the AFSC relief work at Scott's Run. Hickok's description of the dire plight of miners there caused Mrs. Roosevelt to visit Scott's Run in August 1933. FDR's election, the Depression, passage of subsistence homestead legislation (June 16, 1933), and Mrs. Roosevelt's personal concern over Scott's Run miners' plight led to the founding of the first New Deal subsistence homestead project at Arthurdale, near Reedsville, in Preston County. With homesteaders selected mostly from displaced Scott's Run coal miners and Mrs. Roosevelt's much publicized frequent visits there, Arthurdale became a conspicuous example of FDR's more left-wing and controversial experiments to counter the Great Depression.

Subsistence Homestead Projects, 1933-1948

The subsistence homestead idea came from the 1920s back-to-the-land movement, which FDR favored. He had tried to resettle jobless families in rural communities during his New York governorship. As president, FDR first urged congressional friends to enact a bill to allot $25 million to put 25,000 needy families on farms at an average cost of $1,000 per family. When such a bill was formulated, the White House suggested that it be attached as Section 208 of Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Thus was passed with little debate in 1933 a controversial subsistence housing experiment which Congress later forced the government to abolish. The Subsistence Homestead Division was placed under Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes (1874-1952), who named as its administrator Milburn L. Wilson (1885-1969), an Agricultural Adjustment Act administrator and a back-to-the-land enthusiast. AFSC relief director Clarence E. Pickett became Wilson's assistant.

Mrs. Roosevelt Goes to Scott's Run, August 18-19, 1933

Genuinely concerned after hearing Lorena Hickok's description of dreadful Scott's Run conditions, Mrs. Roosevelt, at FDR's request and at the AFSC's invitation, visited Scott's Run on

August 18-19, 1933.[2] With her were Lorena Hickok and Clarence Pickett. Unrecognized, she talked to miners, their wives, and children. To the end of her life she told how Scott's Run's plight had affected her. Conditions were bad and the people dispirited, she told FDR; she feared a fascist-type revolution there.

Presidential adviser Louis M. Howe (1871-1936), encouraged by FDR to create the first subsistence homestead community near Scott's Run, swung into action. He was a newspaperman who had masterminded FDR's political career. Ill and knowing he was near death, Howe pushed Wilson, Pickett, and others to start the northern West Virginia subsistence homestead project. A WVU agricultural experts' committee recommended federal purchase of the Richard M. Arthur farm, part of a 1,200-acre estate 15 miles southwest of Morgantown, about to revert to the state for unpaid taxes, and being used as a WVU experimental farm. With the Arthur farm purchased, Interior Secretary Ickes on October 12, 1933, approved the Arthurdale Resettlement Community Plan for 200 five-acre plots, a community school, and a cooperative store.

New Deal and local officials wanted to show that they could move quickly to cut red tape to ease human misery. They also wanted to avoid undue attention and bad publicity. Rightly or wrongly, because those in the area insisted on it, only native-born Americans were selected as homesteaders. Blacks and the foreign-born were excluded. It was thought that to raise local ire would bring bad publicity and ruin the project. By January 1934 several New Deal agencies were paying a thousand workers on relief $3 per day to build the first houses and roads and to landscape. Problems caused by undue haste and unwise selection of homesteaders were compounded by cost overruns on homes and failure to find industrial jobs for the homesteaders.

Trouble in Paradise

Arthurdale faced frequent disagreements, mismanagement, and lack of communication between New Deal and local officials. Louis M. Howe is said to have told Ickes: you buy the land; I'll buy the houses. Despite Mrs. Roosevelt's caution, but pressed by a desire to house the homesteaders before Christmas 1933, Howe ordered by phone 50 prefabricated Cape Code cottages from Boston. Designed for summer use and unsuitable for northern West Virginia

winters, they were also smaller than the foundations prepared for them. When Mrs. Roosevelt asked New York architect Eric Gugler to recut, rebuild, and winterize the cottages to fit the foundations and the weather, costs skyrocketed.

Arthurdale also suffered from too many uncoordinated committees trying to get too many things done and from interference, though well intentioned, from Howe and Mrs. Roosevelt. There were contradictory orders, delays, waste, and cost overruns. Interior Secretary Ickes, a frugal administrator, wrote in his diary, "We have been spending money down there like drunken sailors."[3] Despite delays and some incomplete and unoccupied homes, Arthurdale opened officially June 7, 1934.

Finding Industry for Arthurdale

A small industry could not be found to supplement homesteaders' inadequate gardening and handicrafts incomes. In October 1934, the Public Works Administration allocated $525,000 to the U.S. Post Office Department for a factory at Arthurdale to manufacture post office furniture and mail boxes. Congressmen and others from furniture-producing states attacked the appropriation as a step toward socialism that would destroy capitalism. Indiana Representative Louis Ludlow, pressured from the Keyless Lock Company in his district (it made post office boxes and equipment), blocked the U.S. Post Office appropriation on January 26, 1935.

On presidential adviser Bernard Baruch's suggestion, a General Electric Company subsidiary built a vacuum cleaner assembly plant in Arthurdale in the fall of 1935. Its opening was aborted when the U.S. Comptroller General ruled that federal funds could not be used for a private business. Some homesteaders early in 1936, with money borrowed from the government, purchased the plant, but it closed after a year because of financial loss. Other industries that failed included a men's shirt factory in 1937, a poultry farm, a grist mill, and a New York firm making cabinets for radios. World War II defense needs did open coal mines again and many homesteaders returned to work in the mines. By the time an industrial firm was producing war materials at Arthurdale, the government was divesting itself of all of its homestead projects.

Other Arthurdale Critics

Critics heightened their attacks on Arthurdale, derisively calling it "Mrs. Roosevelt's project." One such attack from journalist Wesley Stout in the widely read Saturday Evening Post (August 4, 1934)[4] focused on waste at Arthurdale. Another critic, school superintendent William A. Wirt of Gary, Indiana, alleged a New Deal conspiracy to subvert the economy of Morgantown, WV. He charged that resettled miners would no longer be paying rent and taxes in Morgantown. Mrs. Roosevelt replied that few if any of the jobless miners had paid rent or taxes for years.

Arthurdale Community School

From the first Mrs. Roosevelt saw the school as a center of Arthurdale activities. The community school she envisioned was one which John Dewey and other progressive education leaders advocated: a child centered, community centered school, emphasizing children's interest and their learning, not by drill in a set curriculum, but by active involvement in community affairs. This concept went back to Jean Jacques Rousseau's Emile (1762) and was practiced from the mid-nineteenth century by Swiss educator Heinrich Pestalozzi and his followers in Europe and the U.S.

There was also a "social reconstructionist" element in the community school concept. Teachers College, Columbia University educator George S. Counts (1889-1974) wrote Dare the School Build a New Social Order? in 1932. His colleague, Harold O. Rugg (1886-1960), developed and teachers were using social studies textbooks that stressed American society faults as well as successes. Reconstructionists believed that students should discuss current problems, take sides on issues, and that the school should be an active agent to reform; i.e., improve, society.

In this context Mrs. Roosevelt in January 1934 formed a National Advisory Committee for Arthurdale made up of leading prestigious progressive educators: Dean William Russell of Teachers College, Columbia University; Columbia University philosopher John Dewey; Clarence Pickett; E. E. Agger of the Resettlement Administration; Fred J. Kelly of the U.S. Office of Education; Lucy Sprague Mitchell of New York's Bank Street School; and W. Carson Ryan, Progressive Education Association president.

Because Preston County was poor, it was decided to build the Arthurdale school at federal expense and to divide staffing and operating costs with county and state education agencies.

Thinking that operating costs for the community school she envisioned would be too costly for the state and county, Mrs. Roosevelt decided to donate earnings from her radio talks and newspaper articles and to solicit private funds. It was Clarence Pickett who brought Elsie Ripley Clapp to Mrs. Roosevelt's attention as possible director of the Arthurdale school.

Arthurdale School Director Elsie Ripley Clapp (1934-36)

Elsie Ripley Clapp (November 16, 1879-July 28, 1965), born in Brooklyn, NY, had attended Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, 1899-1903; received the B.A. degree in English from Barnard College, New York, in 1908; and the M.A. degree in Philosophy from Columbia University in 1909. She had assisted John Dewey in his Philosophy of Education classes at Teachers College, Columbia University, 1909-13, and again during 1923-29. She had taught in these private schools: Ashley Hall, Charleston, SC, 1913-14; Brooklyn Heights Seminary, NY, 1914-21; Milton Academy, Milton, MA, 1921-22; City and Country School, New York, NY, 1922-24; and Rosemary Junior School, Greenwich, CT, 1924-25. As Principal, Clark Ballard Memorial School, Jefferson County, near Louisville, KY, 1929-34, she developed a community school atmosphere, described later in her two books and several articles. By the early 1930s she was a leader in the Progressive Education Association (1917-55) and headed its Community School Division, which advised government agencies on education.

Mrs. Roosevelt interviewed Elsie Ripley Clapp in February 1934. They agreed on the community school approach. Clapp was appointed that summer as Arthurdale School director. She visited Scott's Run and the Arthur farm, met the parents and children selected to move there, viewed possible school sites, and got the architect to adapt his school building plans to facilitate student group work and community school activities. Clapp brought six experienced progressive teachers with her from the Ballard School and helped select the three local teachers who were paid by the Preston County Public Schools.

Buildings were not yet completed when the Arthurdale school opened in September 1934 with 246 students. Classes were temporarily held in the Arthurdale farm's main building. When

finished, the school complex included a school center, a nursery school, elementary school, high school, and a community recreation center.

Community School Activities

Arthurdale, then a rural beehive of construction, was a natural place to involve school and community. First graders were taken to see buckwheat threshed and potatoes disked. When some cows were acquired, children studied butter and cheese making. A surviving log cabin from colonial times was restored and taken over by fourth graders for a study of pioneer life. Children painted, sang folk songs, and produced plays. There were square dances, sports, and an annual summer music festival. Classes were organized around small interest groups rather than by formal grades. The nursery school, a source of community pride, served as the community child care center.

Most parents were impressed with the school, although some felt that the 3 Rs were being neglected. Some complained because the high school was not accredited in 1936. Clapp made light of the complaint, saying that none of the 3 high school graduates that spring planned to go to college.

Private aid was needed to supplement federal, state, and county funds. Mrs. Roosevelt gave the AFSC her radio talk and newspaper earnings to pay Clapp's salary ($6,000 a year, criticized as too high for the times), buy library books and equipment, and pay other costs. Bernard Baruch, who shared her enthusiasm for the school, contributed, mostly to the nursery school which was not eligible for state funds: $33,518 in 1934-35, $23,775 in 1935-36, $10,272 in 1936-37, and $5,000 a year for the next few years.

Clapp Leaves

In early 1936 when other private funds could not be found, Clarence Pickett told the school advisory committee that the time had come to transfer school control and finance to the state and county. Mrs. Roosevelt reluctantly relayed the decision to the disappointed homesteaders, who wanted Clapp and her staff to remain, possibly paid by Preston County. But Clapp discouraged plans to keep her on. She and the six teachers from the Ballard School left after

school ended in 1936. She became editor of Progressive Education, journal of the Progressive Education Association, October 1937 through May 1939. She wrote several articles and two books, Community Schools in Action, 1939, and The Use of Resources in Education, 1952, extolling her community school experiments at the Ballard School in Kentucky and the Arthurdale School in West Virginia. She lived in retirement in Exeter, NH, where she died July 28, 1965, some three decades after her work at the Arthurdale school.

Was the Arthurdale School Successful?

As a progressive community school, Arthurdale enjoyed esteem and praise under Clapp as director. The school fostered a spirit of community cooperation. Better student social adjustment and a higher standard of community health were achieved. Rexford Tugwell, federal administrator of the Homestead Projects, in praising the original Arthurdale school, said, "Morale at Arthurdale and conditions there were 90 percent better than in other homesteads, entirely due to the school."[5]

Critics said that in its zeal for community service, the school neglected the realities of the complex industrial world around it. Some criticized its lack of long-range planning. In a 1941 survey of its first 49 graduates, all but one reported enjoying the high school, valuing its smallness and friendly informality, but several faulted its limited course offerings. The school's promoters--Mrs. Roosevelt, Baruch, Tugwell, and Pickett--were convinced that the school was the most successful part of the Arthurdale experiment.

After June 1936, Preston County took over the school and appointed a principal. Its original progressive education and community influences dwindled. Traditional teaching and administration followed. The high school was organized along subject department lines. With the approach of World War II, it became just another rural school.

Eden Liquidated: Arthurdale on Its Own

By 1938 national sentiment for reform had waned. New Deal critics in Congress in 1939 cut funds for the subsistence homestead projects. Congress in 1942 directed that government to sell all interests in the homestead communities.Homes, land, and properties were sold to

homesteaders and others. With wartime employment high and new building scarce, the homes were sold by 1948. Arthurdale cost the government an estimated $2 million from 1933 to final liquidation in 1948.

Epilogue

Arthurdale remains a pleasant community in northern West Virginia. Its fiftieth anniversary celebration was held on July 14, 1984, with dinners and speeches. Of the original homesteaders, 27 persons were still living there, 42 couples had lived there until one or both spouses died, and 76 children or grandchildren were heads of families living in Arthurdale, some in the homes of their forebears.[6]

Footnotes

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2. Haid, Stephen Edward (Ph.D. dissertation). "Arthurdale: An Experiment in Community Planning, 1933-1947." West Virginia University, 1975, p. 66.

3. Ickes, Harold L. The Secret Diaries of Harold L. Ickes; Vol. I: The First Thousand Days, 1933-1936. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1953, pp. 152, 207, 218.

4. Stout, Wesley. "The New Homesteaders," Saturday Evening Post, Vol. CCVII (August 4, 1934), pp. 5-7, 61-65.

5. Haid, op cit., p. 295.

6. Eble, Jettie and Charles. The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Homesteading of Arthurdale, W. Va. Arthurdale, WV: Privately Printed, 1984, pp. 9, 14.

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There is a biographical sketch in the "Elsie Ripley Clapp Papers 1910-1943" Mss. Collection 21, The Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901. Obituaries appeared in The Exeter News-Letter (Exeter, NH), August 12, 1965, and in The New York Times, July 31, 1965, p. 21.